

BLACK THEOLOGY

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Samaritan Theological Institute

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All scriptures quoted in this dissertation are taken from the
Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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In a recent science fiction movie, individuals are identified by computer code numbers. THX 1138 functions in a subterranean society of automatons and futuristic technology. Religion is the control factor for disruptive behavior. THX 1138 discovers information that causes him to rebel against the ruling powers. His thoughts are detected by mind police and he is banished to an environment of infinite "whiteness". After wandering for many days, THX 1138 observes a distant object which soon becomes perceptible as another prisoner, a black man, who leads THX 1138 to freedom.

Black Theology has emerged out of the blinding "self-sanctification of the dominant society"¹ to lead estranged Christians into an articulation of their hope for liberation. In Black Theology "whiteness" is the ontological symbol for evil and "blackness" represents authentic humanity. "Whiteness symbolizes the demonic powers which hold mankind, personally and socially, in thrall to inauthentic existence. Blackness is liberation from this power and the resurrection of man. Whiteness is oppression. Blackness is the oppressed who struggle for liberation."²

The historical roots of Black Theology grow deep in the suffering of an enslaved race. The greatest moral contradiction of modern history was the plundering of the African continent by the newly independent American states. Even as the "Declaration of Independence" was being drafted, slaves were petitioning local legislatures for their freedom.

There is a great number of us sencear members of the Church of Christ, how can the master and the slave be said to fulfill that Command Live in Love, let Brotherly love contuner and abound, Beare my Borden. How can the master be said to Beare my Borden when he Beares me down with the Hays chanes of slavery and operson against my will. . . .³

Slave petition to the Massachusetts
colonial legislature, 1774

"The black church was born in slavery."⁴ Having convinced slave owners that evangelizing their human property would insure domesticity and productivity, missionaries dutifully set about the task of catechizing an abducted people. The basic text was Ephesians 6:5, "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ." Although the missionary strove to inculcate "purity of doctrinal belief and daily life in accordance with the accepted standards of Christianity, nothing could have been further from the existential situation in which the slave found himself."⁵

Being deprived of the benefits of citizenship, the religious orientation of the slave erupted in the holy zeal of slave revolts. Slave preachers and white agitators roused the blacks to join in conspiracy against the system. At church meetings and secret gatherings the plantation slaves were told the biblical story of Israel's slavery and exodus to freedom.

I been preaching the gospel and farming since slavery time. When I starts preaching I couldn't read or write and had to preach what Master told me, and he say tell

10. Is there a field you consider yourself knowledgeable enough to teach?
What? Scripture (especially NT)

11. Would you like to be a rap facilitator/leader? Yes

12. Could you come out on Wednesday evening before Prayer Meeting for
teacher/leader meetings with members of the ministerial staff? Yes No

13. Is there another night that would be better for you? Tuesday

14. Preferred time for Christian Education program:

✓ 9:15-10:30 Sunday Morning 6:30-7:30 Wednesday Evening

 5:30-6:30 Sunday Evening Other -- Please state

Name Phillip B. Hany Phone Number 285-6263

Are you a member of MCC-LA? No

METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES
1050 South Hill Street
Los Angeles, California 90055

Dear Friend:

MCC-LA is in the process of forming a Christian Education program to try to deepen our understanding of the Bible, the Christian faith, MCC's program, and other areas which will help us grow as Christians. We need your help to really make the program work for all of us. Would you take a moment to answer the few questions listed below and turn in this form as you leave the church.

1. What areas do you, as a Christian, feel would be most valuable for you to understand more about? the Bible Bible and Homosexuality
Sexuality and Christian Ethics Leadership Christian Beliefs
Prayer (Please circle one or more)

2. Would you like to participate in a Christian Education program that would cover some of these areas or some others that we may not have thought of? Yes No

3. What's your learning style? Do you like to learn from an expert teacher in a formal class situation, or do you prefer to learn in an informal "rap group" situation? Formal Informal

4. What are some of the things you'd like to learn about in a Christian Education program?

responsible freedom in Christ

5. Sometimes we learn better if we have a specific textbook. Do you know of a book/book of the Bible that would make an especially rewarding study for you?

"Liberation of Planet Earth" - Hal Lindsey
(Please give us the name and the author of any book you suggest.)

6. Many of you have had experience as teachers, either in church or in school. Have you taught adults? ✓ Have you taught children? ✓

7. Have you ever taught Bible study? ✓ Or another area of Christian education (Training Union, etc.) What? MCC-LA I Cor.

8. Do you enjoy working with adults? yes Children? yes
Do you really enjoy teaching? yes

9. Would you be interested in being considered (either now or at some future time) as a possible teacher? yes

(over)

The Homosexual Experience: Rules,
Roles and Relationships.

A series of 12 raps designed to explore what it means to be a gay person in today's world.

TOPICS:

- 9/28: Coming Out
- 10/5 : Who Do You Tell?
- 10/12: The Gay Adolescent
- 10/19: Monogamy vs. Open Relationships
- 10/26: The Gay Parent
- 11/2 : Making Relationships Last
- 11/9 : Gay and Grey
- 11/16: Fantasy, Fetishes and Fears
- 11/23: (No meeting - Holiday weekend)
- 11/30: Does Price/Princess Perfect Really Exist?
- 12/7 : Breaking Up is Hard to Do - Why?
- 12/14: Bars/Baths/Bushes or is There Something More to Life?
- 12/21: (No meeting - Holiday weekend)
- 12/28: Everything You Wanted to Know But Were Afraid to Ask

The raps are open to anyone who wants to attend on any night you want to come. If there are too many in attendance for a good discussion, we may break into two groups on some nights.

This is a good way to explore your own feelings, attitudes and understandings, and to learn how others feel about the same things. All discussions are open and accepting. There are no "rights" and "wrongs". Your opinion is just as valid as anyone else's, and what you have to say just as important.

Raps meet Friday evening, 7:30 to 9:30 (Early enough so that you can still go out afterwards, if you want to -- or can join a group of us for a little bar ministry.)

Facilitators: David Holt & Dee Henning

All textbooks will be available through the church bookstore -- purchase limited to those attending the class (supplies are limited).

THE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION PROGRAM
METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH OF
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Under the Direction of
Rev. Marge Ragona
Rev. Dennis Chappelle

Rev. J. A. Harvey - Pastor

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION PROGRAM

Fall 1979

Classes

The Bible and Homosexuality
Conversational Prayer
Understanding the Old Testament

Rap
The Homosexual Experience:
Rules, Roles and Relationships

Metropolitan Community Church
of Los Angeles
1050 South Hill Street
213-748-0121

ENROLLMENT
Sunday, September 23 and 30, 1979

FALL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Bible and Homosexuality

What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

Can one be both gay and a Christian?

What's the difference between today and the time when the Holiness Code was written, and why are the differences important to us?

What do the words in the Bible really mean, and does it matter whether they mean what the Church has traditionally taught or not?

What has the effect of traditional church teaching about homosexuality been on gay people's lives?

Want to find out more about this vitally interesting subject?

Attend our mini-course (6 weeks) and learn more about the Bible, yourself, and what the latest scholarship says on the subject.

Class meets Sunday morning, 9:15 - 10:15 in Friendship Hall (basement).

Informal class with rap session.
(Limited to 20 to facilitate discussion)

Text: Homosexuality and the Bible;
by Rev. Michael England, written for
MCC - Washington, D.C.

Facilitators: Steve Wilkins
Robbie Hamilton

Conversational Prayer: Talking With God

If you attended Rosiland Rinker's workshop during General Conference, you were introduced to her ideas and thoughts about practical prayer and how to learn to be more open in your own prayer life.

For the purposes of this course you will be asked to keep a prayer journal and practice some of the prayer techniques of Rosiland Rinker.

Do you really feel you are communicating with God the way you want to?

Could your prayer life be more vital?

Can you draw closer to God and find the strength you so often need?

Can you share your joy with God?

Come and learn to pray -- come and let your spiritual life take wing!

(You will need to have a notebook in which to record your personal journey)

Class meets Sunday morning, 9:15 - 10:15 in the Deacon's Classroom.

Informal class with individual prayer journal keeping (on your own), and sharing prayer concerns.

Text: Conversational Prayer: Talking With God by Rosiland Rinker

Facilitators: Phil Harry
Darlene Smith

Understanding the Old Testament

Ever wanted to know more about the Bible, but were afraid to open it because you really didn't understand what it was all about -- particularly the Old Testament?

Want to meet some of the most interesting and unbelievable characters ever written about -- yet who really lived and left their mark on our faith -- and on our history?

Want to meet the God of history -- who interacted personally then as God does now -- and discover how our understanding of God has changed over the centuries?

Want to explore your faith and the Scripture that makes that faith richer, fuller, deeper?

Attend our introduction to the Old Testament -- and let yourself be intrigued by history, by the sweep of the Old Testament across that history, and by a larger view of God and your faith -- deeply rooted in those Scriptures!

Class meets Tuesday evening, 7:30-9:30 in the Deacon's Classroom.

Formal class with group discussion. Some outside reading is suggested, and a variety of materials will be distributed.

Text: The Book of the Acts of God
By: Albright and Mann (paperback)

Instructor: Rev. Marge Ragona

them niggers iffen they obeys the master they goes to Heaven; but I knowed there's something better for them, but I daren't tell them 'cept on the sly. That I done lots. I tell 'em iffen they keeps praying, the Lord will set 'em free.⁶

The failure of insurrections led by courageous slave preachers such as Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner convinced Christian slaves of the need for "independent Black churches whose reason for existence was to create the spirit of freedom among black people."⁷ The founding of the African Baptist Church (1788), African Methodist Episcopal Church (1794), African Presbyterian Church (1807), and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (1820) provided the cohesion and impetus required for the monumental task of emancipation.

The progress of emancipation is certain: It is certain because the God who has made of one blood all nations of men, and is said to be no respecter of persons, has so decreed. . . .⁸

Rev. Nathaniel Paul, 1827

Although the Civil War delivered the American slave population from the "house of bondage", the Dred Scott decision verbalized the prevailing sentiment that the blacks "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."⁹

I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the black and white races.¹⁰

Abraham Lincoln

Integration became the next challenge to the blacks quest for equality.

The liberation struggle during the century following the Emancipation Proclamation culminated in the great civil rights movement of the 1950's and the 1960's. On Dec. 1, 1965 a black woman, Mrs. Rosa Parks, refused to surrender her seat in the "whites only" section of a Montgomery Alabama municipal bus. Her action sparked a bus boycott

which was organized in a downtown church pastored by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Combining the social analyses of Reinhold Niebuhr and the concept of Satyagraha (truth-force) developed by Gandhi, Dr. King inaugurated a national non-violent resistance movement. The next decade witnessed explosive riots in every major American city and it soon became clear that the civil rights movement was deepening into a Black revolution.

On Sunday May 4, 1969 James Forman disrupted services at the Riverside Church in New York City and presented the religious establishment with the Black Manifesto. The manifesto demanded reparations to black people of \$500,000,000 from the white Protestant and Catholic churches and Jewish synagogues of America. The ensuing controversy exposed a deeply engrained American civil religion and "spurred the development of a Black theology which had laid dormant within the amalgam of Black religion and Black radicalism for more than half a century."¹¹

During this period James H. Cone joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York City and published his first book, "Black Theology and Black Power". He provided the structure for a Black Theology which interpreted the biblical revelation of God's nature and historical purpose from the perspective of an oppressed people in the pursuit of liberty and justice.

The truth of the Bible is the story of God's call of his people from slavery to freedom. . . divine truth is not an idea but an event breaking into the brokenness of history bestowing wholeness in wretched places. Only one who has experienced and is experiencing the truth of divine liberation can tell the story of how God's people shall overcome.¹²

Black Theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. . . . The message of liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom IS the gospel. Jesus is the Liberator!¹³

National Committee of Black Churchmen

Brothers and sisters, I intend to explain the unexplainable—
find out the undefinable—ponder over the imponderable— and
unscrew the inscrutable.¹⁴

Theology — Ideology

Black Theology insists that a legitimate theology for God's people must begin by making a profound distinction between ideas about God and knowledge of God. The disciple must beware of the danger of confusing the words of man with the Word of God. "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom. . . but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands me and knows me, that I am the Lord who practice kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 9:23-24). Any conceptualization of God that evades the definitive witness of Christ is the projection of human pride rather than divine revelation. "The first task of theology is to recognize that truth is not contained in words. Truth is found in the dynamic of the divine-human encounter in social existence wherein people recognize the connections between historical struggle and ultimate reality."¹⁵

Ideological interpretations of Scripture generally treat God's historically redemptive purposes toward the poor and the oppressed as if their liberation was incidental to the gospel. Failing to account for the relativity of thought processes, ideologists attempt to absolutize linguistic concepts and present truth in legalistic or philosophical categories. ^{In reality,} God's nature is revealed through redemptive acts in history that transcend any attempt to reduce divine revelation to propositional statements about "truth". "Any theology, therefore, that fails to accept the finitude of its categories, speaking instead as if it knows the whole truth and nothing but the truth, is guilty of blasphemy, that is, of an ideological distortion of divine reality."¹⁶

Dynamic - Static

Black Theology is the study of a living God whose revolutionizing activity in the world is dynamic. God's presence can't be intoned and God's attributes can't be carried in a briefcase. The task of a relevant theology is to relate the dynamic of the gospel to the aspirations of an oppressed community. "The weakness of white American theology is that it seldom gets beyond the first century in its analysis of revelation. If I read the New Testament correctly, the resurrection of Christ means that he is also present today in the midst of all societies effecting his liberation of the oppressed."¹⁷

Concrete - Abstract

Black Theology exegetes Scripture to disclose God's Word to those who are oppressed and humiliated in this world. God's Word is God's saving and redeeming action which became flesh in Jesus Christ. Truth is concrete. "When theological discourse overlooks the oppressed and the hope given by Jesus Christ in their struggle, it inevitably becomes 'abstract' talk geared to the ideological justification of the status quo."¹⁸

Universal - Particular

Black Theology is an interpretation of the social basis of theology. Established schools of theology have not adequately considered the culturally determinative factors on their thoughts about God and have been reluctant to accept the validity of cross-cultural dialogue in matters of faith.

The Black theologian is one whose hermeneutical consciousness for an interpretation of the gospel is defined by the oppressed people's struggle of freedom, seeking to adhere to the delicate balance of social existence and divine revelation. In this situation, the theologian must accept the burden and the risk laid upon him by both social existence and divine revelation, realizing that they must be

My master used to ask us children, "Do your folks pray at night?" We said "No", 'cause our folks had told us what to say. But the Lord have mercy, there was plenty of that going on. They'd pray, "Lord, deliver us from under bondage."²¹

Oppression — Liberation

God participates in the human condition by appropriating the suffering of the oppressed. "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old" (Isaiah 63:9).

The central message of the Incarnation is the proclamation that the divine has taken the human situation upon himself so as to redeem humanity. To be sure, there is an absolutely distinctive character in divine revelation, but God has chosen not to apply the radical otherness of divine existence to the struggle of the oppressed for freedom but to the oppressors who make people unfree. God came and is present now, in order to destroy the oppressor's power to hold people in captivity.²²

In Black Theology oppression comprises not only social, economic, and political disfranchisement but any form of ostracism or subjugation within the larger community. "The focus on blackness does not mean that only blacks suffer. . . but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America."²³ Revolt against an oppressive relationship authenticates the humanity of the oppressed and invalidates the unjust "law and order" of the oppressor. "Whiteness symbolizes the activity of deranged men intrigued by their own image of themselves, and thus unable to see that they are what is wrong with the world."²⁴

On God's initiative the cries of the oppressed have become the determinant of judgment.

Then he will say to those at his left hand,
"Depart from me. . . for I was hungry and you
gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave
me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not
welcome me, sick and in prison and you did not
visit me" (Matthew 25:41-43).

The oppressed have not been elected because of any intrinsic value of their word or action but because of God's purposed grace and freedom to be with them in their suffering. The oppressed have been given the opportunity to serve humankind by suffering with God in the divine realization of justice in the world. It is in the fight for justice that God is encountered; and it is in this divine-human encounter that the oppressed realize that their destiny is not determined by oppression because God is with them to deliver them from its ultimate control of their lives.

Liberation is relation to God. "Fellowship with God is the beginning and the end of human liberation."²⁵ By faith the oppressed recognize that their true humanity is actualized in God. From this, Black Theology affirms that human liberation is based on revelation and therefore not a human possession but a divine gift to those who contend in faith against oppression. Contrary to much theological thinking in the past, this new identity in God is not limited to the human capacity to reason but is the inclusion of the liberated person in the realm of God's inclusive program of freedom. "God becomes everything the people need in order to sustain their lives with dignity. . . experiencing the power of God's presence. For without the knowledge of God that comes through divine fellowship the oppressed would not know that what the world says about them is a lie."²⁶

Liberation is relation to self and community. Prayer is the beginning of the practice of liberation. It is the appropriation of dignity and freedom made possible by the gift of divine fellowship. Prayer is the battleground of the venture of freedom wherein the liberated ones give themselves to God in response to God's redemptive

activity on their behalf. To give oneself to an authority other than the divine will of liberation is to negate divine fellowship. Community worship is the celebration of God's presence in the midst of a downtrodden people. By sharing in a mutual experience of God's love and power, worshippers "amen" the integrity of God's promise of deliverance and testify to God's liberating presence in their lives.

The slaves were uneducated by Western standards, but they were not fools. . . . They were fully aware that the God who demanded their devotion and the spirit that infused their secret meetings and possessed their souls and bodies in the ecstasy of worship, was not the God of the slavemaster, with his whip and his gun, nor the God of the plantation preacher, with his segregated services and unctious injunctions to humility and obedience.²⁷

Liberation is the practice of freedom in history. With the acquisition of dignity received in the dynamic of fellowship with God, the powerless are empowered to exert a self-determinative consciousness to political praxis. As the maligned demand justice in human relationships, they not only confirm their infinite value in Christ but also disentrall the oppressors from their delusive pretensions.

Only the oppressed, by their insistence, can deliver the oppressors from the demonic assumption that the removal of oppression is an option. Both oppressed and oppressor share in this liberation. They are dependent upon each other for the final breaking of the impasse that oppression causes and perpetuates.²⁸

The oppressed must fight against the oppressors in order to fight for them. Because the oppressed cannot rely on their own strength, their striving for justice must coincide with the consummating judgment of Jesus.

His coming presence requires that we not make any historical struggle an end in itself. We struggle because it is a sign of Jesus presence with us and

and of his coming presence to redeem humanity. His future coming therefore is the key to the power for our struggle.²⁹

Liberation is hope. Black eschatology is the grounding of hope in God's liberating work in the world. The oppressed are called to a universal dimension of liberating hope. Election involves service even to oppressors. Recognizing that liberation is for all, the liberated become servants of all.

This recognition does not make one submissive to unjust powers, but humble before Jesus Christ who is Lord of all. His presence in our midst requires that we subordinate our personal interests to the coming liberation for all. Those who see God's coming liberation breaking into the present must live as if the future is already in their midst. They must bear witness to humanity's liberation by freeing the present from the past and for the future. This means fighting for the inauguration of liberation in our social existence, creating new levels of human relationship in society. The struggle for liberation is the service the people of God render for all, even those who are responsible for the structure of slavery.³⁰

Speak the truth to the people
To identify the enemy is to free the mind
Free the mind of the people
Speak truth.³¹

Revelation — Scripture

God's nature is disclosed through historical action on behalf of an oppressed people. Faith is the response which brings the perspective by which a community recognizes God's liberating activity. Revelation includes the discovery that God has completely identified with the helpless. Black Theology terms this the "blackness" of God. "By electing Israelite slaves as his people and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, God discloses to men that he is known where men experience humiliation and suffering."³²

The Old Testament is a document of God's historical interventions for the sake of weak and defenseless people. The Exodus was the decisive event in Israel's history. "And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord. . . ." (Exodus 14:31). The Exodus was the basis of Israel's covenant with Yahweh. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples. . . ." (Exodus 19:4-5).

The covenant is an invitation to Israel to enter into a responsible relationship with the God of the Exodus wherein he will be her God and she his special possession. This invitation places Israel in a situation of decision because the covenant requires obedience to the will of Yahweh. To accept the covenant means that Israel must now live as Yahweh's liberated people becoming the embodiment of freedom made possible through his freeing presence.³³

It is utterly crucial for a right understanding of God's revelatory activity and an appropriate response of faith in God's integrity,

to grasp that the true and only viable basis for a relationship with God is the acceptance of God's sovereign guidance wholly distinct from the "ministration of death" - law (II Corinthians 3:7f.; cf Hebrews 4:1-2, 12:18-20; cf Galatians ch. 3). "Actually God had not spoken at Sinai of sacrifices but only of obedience even before the law was given" ("Studies in the Book of Jeremiah" by Charles Lee Feinburg; The Chosen People, April 1978, p. 13). (See Jeremiah 7:21-27.)

The covenant not only places upon Israel the responsibility of accepting the absolute sovereignty of Yahweh, as defined in the first commandment, it also requires Israel to treat the weak in her midst as Yahweh has treated her. This is the significance of the abidictic laws in the covenant code. "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21).³⁴

God continued the process of revelation through the prophets. "The prophets of Israel are prophets of social justice, reminding the people that Yahweh is the author of justice."³⁵ Ignoring God's historical sovereignty and perverting their holy vocation as a kingdom of priests to the nations, the powerful became oppressors of the weak. "Listen. . . you who oppress the poor and crush the destitute, the Lord has sworn by his holiness that your time is coming" (Amos 4:1-2). Even though Yahweh "cared for you in the wilderness, in a land of burning heat. . . (you) being filled, grew proud; and so forgot me" becoming "an oppressor trampling on justice, doggedly pursuing what is worthless" (Hosea 13:5-6; 5:11 NEB).

Isaiah proclaimed that Yahweh is the God of justice who sides with the weak against the strong. "Is it nothing to you that you crush my people. . ." "Cease to do evil and learn to do right. Pursue justice and champion the oppressed" (Isaiah 3:15; 1:17 NEB).

On that day deaf men shall hear
when a book is read,
and the eyes of the blind shall see
out of impenetrable darkness.
The lowly shall once again rejoice in the Lord,
and the poorest of men exult
in the Holy One of Israel.
The ruthless shall be no more,
the arrogant shall cease to be;
those who are quick to see mischief,
those who charge others with a sin . . .
or by falsehood deny justice to the righteous--
all these shall be exterminated.

Isaiah 29:18-21 (NEB)

In the New Testament, the revelatory event of God takes place in the person of Christ. He is the event of God, telling us who God is by what he does on behalf of the oppressed. For Christian thinking the man Jesus must be the decisive interpretive factor in everything we say about God because he is the complete revelation of God. 36

The consummate expression of God's nature is perfectly revealed in the living example of Jesus Christ. His treatment of the outcast and the afflicted manifest the very heart of God. "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). In Jesus we see God taking upon the divine nature the suffering and humiliation of the oppressed. In him love and justice are perfectly realized. Jesus is the Black Christ. His suffering gives authenticity to the claim of Black Theology that the black experience is a source of the truth; yet, "like scripture. . . (is) not the truth itself. Jesus Christ is the truth and thus stands in judgment over all statements about truth."³⁷

Black Theology recognizes the Bible as the primary source for the inter-

pretation of God's self-disclosure. However, Scripture is not the revelation of God; only Christ is. The Bible is an important guide for a contemporary understanding of Christ's liberating presence in the world. "The meaning of Scripture is not to be found in the words of Scripture as such but only in its power to point beyond itself to the reality of God's revelation; and in America, that means black liberation."³⁸ Black Theology is a twentieth century analysis of God's continuing revelation.

Black Theology (morely) tries to discern the activity of the Holy One as he effects his purpose in the liberation of man from the forces of oppression. We must make decisions about where God is at work so we can join him in his fight against evil. But there is no perfect guide for discerning God's movement in the world. Contrary to what many conservatives would say, the Bible is not a blueprint on this matter. It is a valuable symbol for pointing to God's revelation in Christ, but it is not self-interpreting. We are thus placed in an existential situation of freedom in which the burden is on us to make the decision without a guaranteed ethical guide. This is the risk of faith.³⁹

The New Testament is a record of the early church as it endeavored to obey the Spirit of Jesus in the implementation of what had been "bound and loosed" in heaven (Matthew 16:19). That account is an invaluable tool for apprehending what Jesus is doing in our midst today. Historically, the black community has placed great confidence in the message of Scripture without getting bogged down in pedantic quibblings regarding the accuracy of details or brutal controversies over the intangible nature of inspiration.

It is as if blacks have intuitively drawn the all-important distinction between infallibility and reliability. They have not contended for a full, explicit infallibility, feeling perhaps that there is mystery in the book as there is in Christ.⁴⁰

Black Theology honors the spirit of the text and accepts the reality of inspiration without scrutinizing the spirit of grace which used sinful men to relate the story of redemption. To say that "all

Scripture is inspired by God and profitable. . . ." (II Timothy 3:16) is to speak in non-absolute terms. ". . . for words are not static things but expressions of thought inevitably modified by their context.

41

Efforts to prove verbal inspiration of the Scriptures are the result of men failing to see the real meaning of the biblical message: the liberation of man!⁴²

(See "The Honky Hermeneutic" by Clarence Hilliard; The Other Side, May-June 1976, pp. 66-72.)

The question of authority for the black theologian is resolved in the experience of oppression itself. Because Christ has been made synonymous with oppression, the "offscourings" of society find an authoritative knowledge of God that transcends theological debate. There can be no objective measurement which guarantees that one is doing the work of God. There is only the subjective knowledge imparted by the Spirit in "sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). The guarantee witnessed by God's Spirit in one's heart (II Corinthians 1:22) brings an existential certainty which compels the liberated person to live solely in the truth of God's reality; freedom. Consequently, the believer must deal with every life situation without an absolute ethical guide. To insist on external constraints or restraints is to deny the freedom of the Christian. The matrix for all decisions is the freedom found in Christ to be all for the neighbor (I Corinthians 9:19-23).

My mammy she work in the field all day and piece quilt all night. I never see how my mammy stand such hard work. She stand up for her children though. The old overseer he hate my mammy, 'cause she fight him for beating her children. . . My mammy just grin all over her face and say: I's saved! I ain't gwine-a grieve no more. No matter how much you all done beat me and my children, the Lord will show me the way. And some day we never be slaves.⁴³

God - Humanity

Accepting the risk of faith and the ethical burden of making decisions about life and death without an infallible guide, I contend that God is found among the poor, the wretched, and the sick. "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (I Corinthians 1:26f.).⁴⁴

This is the reason God chose the Israelite slaves and not the Egyptian slavemasters, the oppressed in Israel and not the oppressors. The gospels unanimously picture Jesus as the Suffering Servant whose obedience to God's will caused him to identify with the marginales of society, the "sinners", and not the self-designated righteous. To be consistent one must acknowledge the obvious implication for our day, that God has chosen what is "black" to rebuke what is "white". The divine election of the oppressed assures to them the existential authority of judgment on the high and mighty. God is present vindicating the suffering of the victims of social ostracism.

Black Theology is language about the liberating nature of God's presence. God's immanence is the expression of the infinite in finite, concrete human existence. God's transcendence is the reality of the divine which exceeds the creature's capacity to comprehend. The language of immanence and transcendence does not have reference

to spacial concepts. God is not "above" or "beyond" the world. God is known in undertaking humanity's deliverance and revered in the inscrutable purpose of the Eternal for humankind. Human dignity is a reflection of this plan conceived in the "councils of eternity".

If we believe the crucified Christ to be the representative of God on earth, we see the glory of God no longer in the crowns of the mighty but in the face of the man who was executed on the gallows. What the authorities intended to be the greatest humiliation - namely the cross - is thus transformed into the highest dignity. It follows that the freedom of God comes to earth not through crowns - that is to say, through the struggle for power - but through love and solidarity with the powerless.⁴⁵

God is just because justice is an inalienable aspect of the divine nature. God is righteous because righteousness is the inevitable consequence of justice: God is putting right what men and women have made wrong. Love is God effecting righteousness in human history: humanity's welfare is God's primary concern. God's justice, righteousness and love are manifested in God's desire to be for people when they cannot be for themselves.

Humanity is created in the image of God. Being in the image of God is to fulfill God's intentions for humankind. This fulfillment is described in the Bible as freedom. "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Galatians 5:1). The biblical concept of image as freedom indicates that people cannot obey oppressive laws and still be authentically human. In a fallen world controlled by oppressive social structures, God's image in humanity expresses itself as the struggle against the forces of inhumanity. The denial of freedom destroys that component of a person which gives one dignity.

The loss of dignity is, in reality, the loss of that which God has given man in the first place.

Man is a self-determining creature. This is a part of what the Scripture means by saying he is made in the image of God. Man is a moral being: he has the ability to choose right or wrong. He has the (right) to decide what to do with his person.⁴⁶

To understand God's purpose for humanity, one must focus on the Oppressed One and what he is doing in an oppressed community as they seek the liberty which is granted in Christ. Having encountered the cruelty of oppressors, the oppressed know firsthand the nature of evil. Having experienced the depravity of human pride, the oppressed realize in truth that "no one is good"; yet, being the recipients of Christ's ministry to the afflicted they can affirm "but God alone" (Mark 10:18). It is God's goodness which imparts worth to a person. God in Christ is the personification of freedom and all God intends for humanity. As Jesus' freedom was expressed in complete devotion to the needs of others, so the free person defines their being as dedication to the liberation of humankind. "As he died to make us holy, let us live to make all free."

Black Theology must take seriously the reality of black people — their life of suffering and humiliation. This must be the point of departure of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk. When that man is black and lives in a society permeated with white racist power, he can speak of God only from the perspective of the socio-economic and political conditions unique to black people. Though the Christian doctrine of God must precede the doctrine of man, Black Theology knows that black people can view God only through black eyes that behold the brutalities of white racism. To ask them to assume a "higher" identity by denying their blackness is to require them to accept a false identity and to reject reality as they know it to be.⁴⁷

Sometimes I hangs my head an' cries,
But Jesus goin' to wipe my weepin' eyes.⁴⁸

Jesus - Sin

Christianity begins and ends with the man Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection. He is the Revelation, the special disclosure of God to man, revealing who God is and what his purpose for man is.⁴⁹

Jesus is who he was. Black Theology is concerned to know who Jesus was because that is the only way to assess who he is. The historical Christ provides continuity with the contemporary situation in the relating of his humanity to the present battle for truth. "Being the express image of God's person, Jesus showed us what God is like. True Christian orthodoxy, therefore, lies in looking at Jesus' example and words. . . ."⁵⁰ Because Jesus is the gospel which addresses every situation, we can know God's relation to the wretched of the earth by exploring the life demonstration of the Christ of first century Palestine. Black Theology emphasizes the manifestation of Christ as the Oppressed One whose earthly ministry was centered in healing the wounded and abused. Because of his disclosure of the redeeming power of love, the oppressed can know that their liberation is a continuation of his work.

Jesus was born in a feeding trough for cattle; "the equivalent of a beer case in a ghetto alley".⁵¹ For a theology of the oppressed it is not without significance that the Creator chose to enter the arena of history under impoverished circumstances which symbolically portrayed God's complete identification with the poor. His messiahship involves the living declaration that God is one with the insignificant and the deprived even in birth. The announcement of the incarnation event to bedouin shepherders, under the employ of Jerusalem authorities for the lucrative animal sacrifice "business", underscores God's mission to the outcast.

In his baptism, Jesus embraced the condition of sinners and thereby conveyed the quality of the approaching kingdom, that is, God initiated reconciliation taking on the confusion and despair of lost humanity. The temptation narrative illustrates Jesus' refusal to compromise his acceptance of humanity's "helpless estate". The Galilean ministry was the literal fulfillment of Messiah's prophesied mandate:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to
preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty them that are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year
of the Lord.

Luke 4:18-19

Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom is an announcement of God's decision about oppressed man. "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand," that is, slavery is about to end, since the reign of God displaces false authorities. To "repent and believe in the gospel" is to recognize the importance of the hour at hand and to accept the reality of the new age by participating in it as it is revealed in the words and work of Jesus, whose relation to God and man is defined by his words and work.⁵²

Jesus is who he is. The living declaration of the Resurrection reveals that God is present in all dimensions of human liberation. On the cross God defeated all principalities and powers that prevent the realization of a liberated humanity (cf Colossians 2:8-15). ". . . the statement 'Christ disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them'. . . outlines the truth that these powers who stand behind the law have lost their potency since God negated the condemnatory power of the law by securing its fulfillment in Christ."⁵³ In the cross and resurrection events the oppressed recognize that their suffering has been vindica-

ted by Christ's victory over the forces of death. In their revolt against oppression they encounter the existential significance of the Resurrected One. God has inaugurated the new age of liberty disrupting the dominant social structures of injustice.

The new age of the coming Kingdom means a revolutionary usurpation of the present value system. The last shall be first and the first last. Herein is the ethical import of Jesus' words and deeds. They were the concrete signs that the new age is dawning right in the social context of the people.⁵⁴

Jesus is who he will be. "The meaning of Jesus Christ for us today is not limited to his past and present existence. Jesus Christ is who he will be. He is not only the Crucified and Risen One but also the Lord of the future who is coming again to consummate the liberation that is already happening in our present."⁵⁵ The basis of hope for the oppressed in their continuing endeavor to reach the "promised land" is found in the reality of God's eternal kingdom of which the presence of Jesus in their midst is witness and guarantee.

Sin is a condition of being resulting in separation from God; death.

The Lord's arm is not so short
that he cannot save
nor his ear to dull to hear;
it is your iniquities that raise a barrier
between you and your God,
because of your sins he has hidden his face
so that he does not hear you.

Isaiah 59:2 (NEB)

The Genesis account of our defection alludes to this conundrum by portraying God as seeking fellowship with the progenitors of the human race even after their heedless adventure with the "knowledge of good and evil". Death is the consequence of turning one's back on

God's loving admonitions. Death is not punishment for disobedience. Sin is humanity rejecting its identity from the source of being and vainly attempting to be what it is not. Sin is thus a condition of estrangement from the source of meaning and purpose in the universe.

Sin is not the violation of an abstract universal code of ethical and/or moral behavior. Sin is more than transgression of law. The law was given to the nation of Israel to "consign all things to sin" (Galatians 3:22). God, faith and Jesus are all "one". Sin, law and death are utterly and absolutely outside God (Galatians 3:19-20).

There is no law in love!

Sin is broken relation with God. . . :

The Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Genesis 3:9-10).

. . . resulting in alienation from the neighbor:

He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:11-12).

The Bible is not concerned with rational explanations of the origin of sin. The biblical emphasis is on what God is doing about sin. This is expressed in the concept of redemption. The outcome of the process of redemption is liberation.

Righteousness is not defined by arbitrary codes and regulations imposed by human societies. Righteousness is determined by God's liberating activity in Jesus Christ "setting captives free" to love as he loved. In responding to the One who "loved us first", the liberated person is spiritually transformed with the consequent desire and capacity to attain the reality of the new age; fellowship with God and neighbor. The new humanity is animated and controlled by the divine reality; freedom in love. For a humanity come of age,

sin is a denial of God's liberating activity in Christ. It is a way of living and thinking in which the individual refuses to be freed from private interests to new community in Christ. Separated from God's purpose in the world, the self-contained person automatically identifies the ultimate with alien self-interests resulting in oppression and misery.

The problem of sin is not a legalistic issue connected with God's honor in abstract theory. The problem of sin is an alienation from God that is always connected with injustice and oppression. Thus the atonement of Jesus Christ represents God taking the place of the oppressed in history so that they might be given the freedom to create a new future as defined by the liberation struggle in history.⁵⁶

Those who seek freedom do not receive a knowledge of God's will in the form of absolute and universal precepts. Obedience to the divine will of liberation involves the risk of faith. Those seeking the liberty which is granted in Christ are not immune to sin and error. Having begun in the Spirit, though, they trust the One who is faithful and just to continue cleansing them from all unrighteousness as they proceed in faith to realize the goal set before them. They will not allow anyone to defraud them of salvation's prize and are given latitude in the life of faith to explore ethical and moral decisions in the light of covenant obedience. ". . . the moral and religious implications of any act of risk are always sufficiently cloudy to make it impossible to be certain of right action. Because man is finite, he can never reach that state of security in which he is free of anxiety when he makes moral decisions."⁵⁷

The difference between Christian and non-Christian ethics does not involve definitions of particular acts but the source from which those acts arise (Titus 1:15; cf Romans 14:16, 22-23). "We must realize that what God takes into account is the source of things, not whether they are good or evil", i.e., as defined exoterically. (Quoting from "The Glorious Church" by Watchman Nee to the church in Shanghai, 1939-1942, The Stream Publishers: Los Angeles, 1968.)

Jesus is the source of action for the liberated Christian walking by faith. Without the sanctifying power released at the cross, no behavior would have eternal significance, whether or not it was judicially correct. The life imparted by the Risen Christ is the sole criterion of what has eternal value. "The only certainty we are permitted is that the Scripture claims that Jesus will be with us in our conflicts. And for those who have met him, this divine promise is enough to hold them together so that they can fight to make the world a humane place to live."⁵⁸

We black people are a religious people. From the earliest time we have acknowledged a Supreme Being. With the fullness of our physical bodies and emotions we have unabashedly worshipped Him with shouts of joy and tears of pain and anguish. We neither believe that God is dead, white, nor captive to some rationalistic and dogmatic formulation of the Christian faith which relates Him exclusively to the canons of the Old and New Testaments, and accomodate Him to the reigning spirits of a socio-technical age. Rather, we affirm that God is Liberator in the man Jesus Christ, that His message is Freedom, and that today He calls all men to be what they are in themselves, and among their own people, in the context of a pluralistic world society of dignity, and self-determination for all. We believe that in a special way God's favor rests today upon the poor and oppressed peoples of the world and that he calls them to be the ministering angels of His judgment and grace, as His Kingdom of Freedom and peace breaks in from the future upon a world shackled to ancient sins and virtues.⁵⁹

Once when Master Gilliam took one of his slaves to church he told him that he mustn't shout that day - said he would give him a new pair of boots if he didn't shout. About the middle of the services, the old slave couldn't stand it no longer. He jumped up and hollered: "Boots or no boots, I gwine to shout today."60

Freedom

The freedom toward which the Afro-American religious experience and early Black Theology tended was freedom as existential deliverance, as liberation from every power or force that restrains the full, spontaneous release of body, mind and spirit from every bondage which does not contribute to the proper development of the whole person in community.61

Freedom is the opposite of oppression. Inherent in freedom is the recognition that the present world system is evil. By definition, the subjugated and ostracized are in the best position to make this analysis of society. Freedom for them involves a revolt against all forces that impede the development of the new humanity. Consequently, the liberated person must refuse to let any external power define their existence.

Human freedom is derived from relation to the Creator. In responding to divine revelation, those withstanding godless domination dare not give allegiance to any enslaving power which would usurp the authority of God's liberating presence. When the liberated affirm their freedom in God they are compelled to resist any law that contradicts human dignity. By refusing to validate oppressive laws, the liberated not only confirm their freedom in Christ but their true humanity as well.

Liberation includes the knowledge of who the individual is created to be in the context of an oppressed community striving for freedom. There can be no freedom for God in isolation from the humiliated and abused. No one is completely free until all are free.

Once man grasps corporate freedom he is on the way to becoming man. On his own, man remains in the state of concealment. Only through liberation from the concealment of privatism can we be set on the road to becoming human. This occurs in the unconcealed one who uncovers the new direction of our destiny toward a new future: "So if the Son liberates you, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).⁶²

The truly free individual enlists in the divine enterprise of liberation because this person recognizes that the degradation of anyone compromises the integrity of everyone and thereby limits the implementation of God's liberating intentions for all humanity.

The assertion that liberation is for all does not mean that all will regard God's coming realm of freedom as good news. Their mental enslavement to their few crumbs from the master's table often negates their desire to share in the freedom of humanity.⁶³

The fear of freedom itself and the risks involved in conflict with the present world system prevent many from joining in the fight for freedom. The liberated person takes courage from the historical reality of the Resurrection which gives the transcendent hope that death is not the goal of history. Rather, history is the stage for God's ongoing project of freedom.

To believe in the resurrection transforms faith from a deliverance from the world into an initiative that changes the world and makes those who believe into worldly, personal, social and political witnesses to God's righteousness and freedom in the midst of a repressive society and an unredeemed world. In this, faith comes to historical self-consciousness and to the recognition of its eschatological task within history" ("Toward a Political Hermeneutic of the Gospel" by Jurgen Moltmann; Union Theological Seminary Quarterly Review, Vol. xxiii, No. 4 (Summer 1968, pp. 211, 213)).

In the New Testament, the burden of freedom is described in terms of being free from the law. To be free in Christ means that man is stripped of the law as a guarantee of salvation and is

(Luke 6:20, Mt. 5:3*)

* Matthew 11:5 presents the preaching of the gospel to the poor (Is. 61:1) as the climactic evidence of the arrival of the Messiah, and Matthew 5:3 pronounces a blessing on the poor in spirit. Both of these passages are rooted deeply in Israel's piety, in the long tradition of God's help for the poor and oppressed (the ^{anawim}).

"The Poor Man's Gospel" by Peter David
Themelios

placed in a free, mature love-relationship with God and man, which is man's destiny and in which Christ is the pioneer. Christian freedom means being a slave to Christ in order to do his will. Again this is no easy life; it is a life of suffering because the world and Christ are in constant conflict. To be free in Christ is to be against the world.⁶⁴

The earthly life of Jesus Christ makes it clear that suffering is the burden of freedom. To choose freedom in Christ is to choose an existence of suffering (Philippians 3:8-12). The quality of life revealed in Jesus convince the free person that to be for Christ is to be against any form of societal discrimination. This commitment to oppose prejudice entails personal rejection by the dominant group. Nonetheless, to be for Christ is to be for the oppressed. Jesus conveyed this truth by proclaiming that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor and unwanted (Luke 6:20, Mt. 5:3*). The kingdom is for "social rejects" because they represent the "meaning of oppression and the certainty of liberation".

Jesus himself belongs to the marginales, the forgotten, the nobodies. It is exactly where the glory of humanity is least obvious that it appears in its true power. We dare never forget the identity of Jesus with the marginal figures of life. It is here that corporate selfhood breaks forth. And it is in the ability to identify with the forgotten, the nobodies, that we can check out the truth as to what Jesus was about.⁶⁵

To be free is to be able to identify with those on the borders of society through the life of the one who first demonstrated the true glory of God. Through the life of Christ, one is able to enter the kingdom of God, "the realm in which all men are free as the truly free man rules over all".⁶⁶

The story of liberation is the truth of freedom being realized in the midst of the oppressed community by the dynamic presence of God. The power of God's presence gives the strength to continue in the liberation struggle. The glory of God's love gives an openness to

fight together with all victims of bias and misunderstanding regardless of their genetic origin. The community of faith continues in the quest for freedom because the one who is their future is also their "refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). "It does not matter what the oppressors say or do or what they try to make us out to be, we have a freedom not made with human hands."⁶⁷

According to Scripture, the human freedom to hope for a new heaven and a new earth is grounded in God's freedom. Divine freedom is not merely an affirmation of the self-existence of God, his complete transcendence over creaturely existence. It also expresses God's will to be in relation to his creatures in the social context of their striving for the fulfillment of humanity. That is, he is free to be for us. The biblical God is the God whose salvation is liberation. He is the God of Jesus Christ who calls the helpless and weak into a newly created existence. God not only fights for them but takes their humiliated condition upon the divine Person and thereby breaks open a new future for (them), different from their past and present miseries. Here is the central meaning of the cross, dramatically revealed in the Markan account of Jesus' cry of dereliction: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" (15:34). These words show the depth of Jesus' agony and pain of being abandoned by his Father. But because he was one with divinity and humanity, the pain of the cross was God suffering for us and with us so that our humanity can be liberated for freedom in the divine struggle against oppression.⁶⁸

The revelation of God in history as the source and goal of freedom brings to an oppressed community the greatest gift: hope.

FOOTNOTES

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4. James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, Seabury Press: New York, 1969, p. 91.
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7. Cone, p. 130.
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19. Cone, 98.
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56. Cone, p. 237.
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58. Cone, God of the Oppressed, p. 208.
59. Wilmore, pp. 305-306.
60. Botkins, p. 28.
61. Wilmore, p. 298.
62. Reist, p. 181.
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67. Cone, God of the Oppressed, p. 140.
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BLACK WOMEN & THE CHURCH

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